VII.—*A Description of the Chapel of Saint Erasmus in Westminster Abbey.* *Communicated by* J. T. Micklethwaite, *Esq.*

Read January 27, 1870.

The chapel of S. John Baptist, the north-western of the four polygonal chapels which surround the apse of Westminster Abbey, differs from the remaining three in that it is now entered, not by a door in the middle of the screen separating it from the ambulatory, but by a kind of vestibule cut through the northern of the two great piers which fill up the spaces between the last of the rectangular and the first of the polygonal chapels. It is to this vestibule that I wish to call attention, and in doing so I shall first desrcibe it in its present condition, and then point out the various changes which it seems to have undergone, and endeavour to draw some conclusions as to its history and the uses to which it has been put.

The entrance to the vestibule from the ambulatory corresponds exactly in position with the tomb of the Princess Catherine on the south side of the church, and consists of a very beautiful doorway of early-perpendicular character, the label of which is stopped by two angels holding shields bearing respectively Quarterly:—France ancient and England, and S. Edward Confessor. These shields indicate the reign of Richard II., a date which is confirmed by the architectural detail.

On the east side of the doorway outside is an iron bracket with staples above and below it. This may have held a collecting-box, or possibly a *benitier;* I am inclined to think the former. Above the arch are painted the words "Sanctus Erasmus," in letters of the time of Henry VII. Remains of painting—flowers, chevrons, spirals, &c.—exist all over the doorway. And on the west jamb there is the outline of a late shield; but after a careful examination I have been unable to find any trace of a bearing upon it. Above the fourteenth-century doorway appears the early-English string which runs all round the interior of that part of the church rebuilt by Henry III. And over this again is a very rich perpen-

dicular niche, also an insertion, which I shall describe more particularly further on.

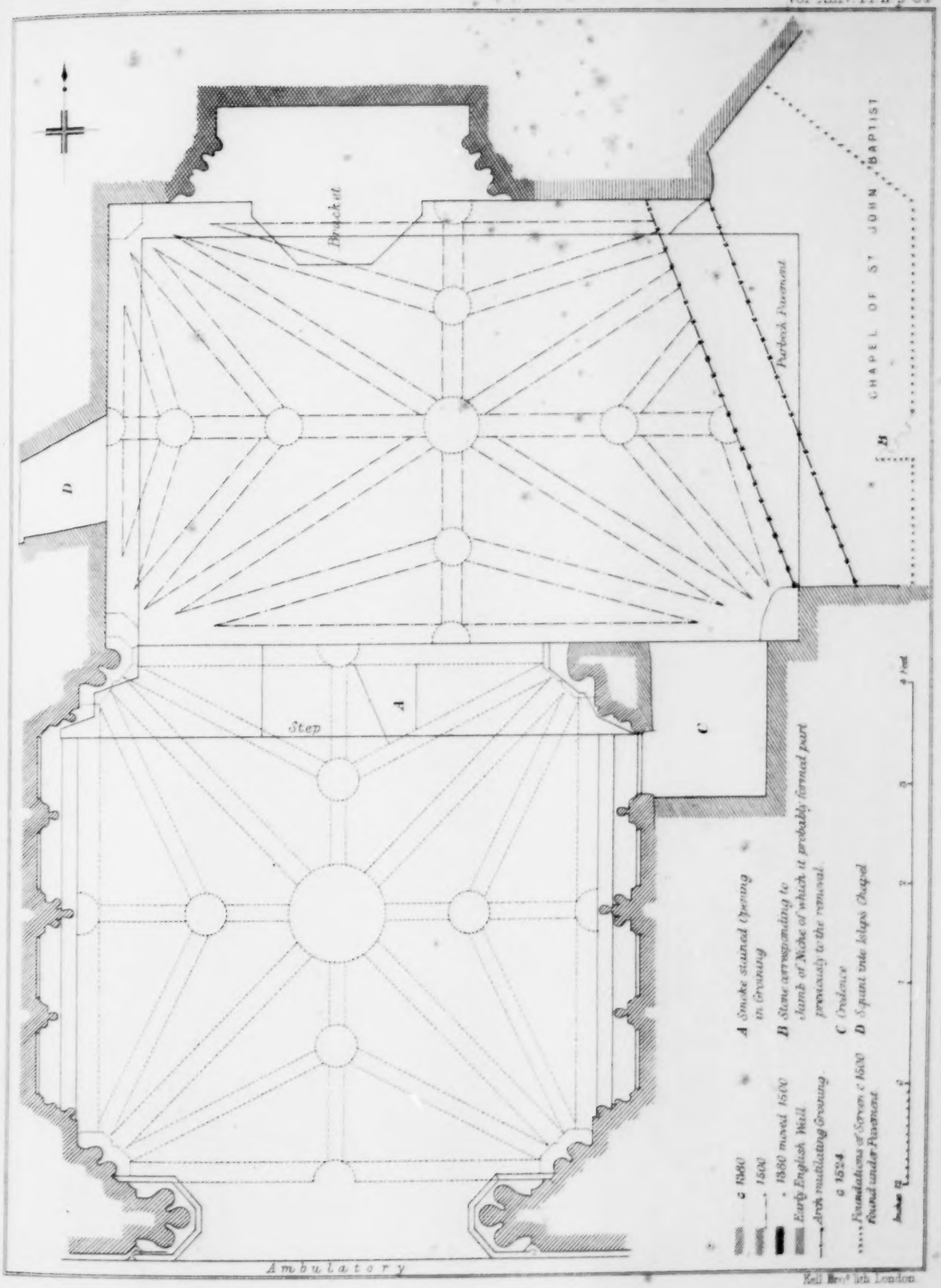
The arch is closed by a pair of low doors curiously divided down the middle of a panel, and surmounted[a] by a formidable double row of spikes with serrated edges. The upper part of the arch is also closely grilled. Passing through this doorway we come to a sort of lobby about five feet square, with groined roof and panelled walls, all evidently of the same date as the entrance. The central boss of the groining represents the Assumption, and those of the wall ribs are half figures of angels. In one cell a stone has been omitted, and, on examining the wall of the church above, I find a wooden peg, a line hung from which will pass through the opening thus left. The whole of the walls of this lobby are painted like the doorway, and the groining has stars on a white ground. The pavement is of Purbeck marble in triangles, eight of which in the middle are replaced by four seemingly modern stones. The walls are covered with small iron hooks, some arranged in rows and others dotted about irregularly. Some are also found in the cells of the groining.

An examination of the masonry leaves no doubt that originally the north side of this lobby was closed by a wall. But this is now removed, and, passing up a Purbeck marble step, itself an insertion, we enter the second division of the vestibule. This, like the first, is vaulted in one bay, but is much broader from west to east, and, viewed from within, the junction looks very clumsy. At the time of the alteration the north-eastern vaulting shaft of the fourteenth century-work was cut away, and its capital (or rather, I think, a new one inserted in place of it) is now supported by a shield, upon which is painted Argent, a cross gules, *I think*, between four uncertain objects. The groining of this second part is much inferior and looks at least a century later than that of the first, and the walls are plain instead of being panelled. But, strangely enough, on the north side is a large shallow niche, which is certainly of the same date as the first division. Below this is a bracket,[b] and on the west side is a squint from Islip's Chapel. This, though only nine inches broad, has had an iron bar up the middle of it; it is now closed on the outside. On the south is a kind of credence, which also opens into the east side of the earlier division, mutilating[c] the panelling in so doing. The walls are covered with a painted diaper. The

[a] The top rail of these doors is cased with thin sheet-iron.

[b] The lower part of the niche is mutilated apparently by the pulling out of a capping of this bracket.

[c] At this place the fourteenth century lining is seen to be seven inches thick.



WESTMINSTER ABBEY, CHAPEL OF ST ERASMUS.

Published by the Society of Antiquaries of London 1872.

groining has stars, and the mouldings of the niche are painted with spirals, &c., as in the first part. At the back of the niche is the outline of a figure, which has been secured at the shoulders by two iron hooks still remaining in the wall. Round the head is painted a circular nimbus, from which proceed long flamboyant rays filling up the top of the niche.

On the east spandril outside the niche is painted the White Hart[a] of Richard the Second, and below this a pattern of fleurs-de-lis, yellow on a blue ground, at regular intervals. This wall has been repainted at some time with a brown wash.

The groining is cut away diagonally towards the east by a clumsily-formed arch through which we now enter the Chapel of S. John Baptist. But the pavement which is of Purbeck triangles, like that of the earlier part, retains the rectangular form required for the completion of the groining.

The iron hooks mentioned as occurring in the first division are also found here, but are not so numerous, and seem arranged in no order. A few larger hooks are scattered about both parts, and on the west side near their junction is an iron eye projecting from the wall.

Such is this corner at the present time; but so many different features and dates of work crowded into so small a space seem to show that it was originally intended for some more important purpose than to be a mere vestibule to the larger chapel. And I now propose, whilst describing as nearly as they can now be ascertained, the various changes which the place has undergone, to point out what seems to me to have been its use in each successive condition.

Whether any hollow was left in the pier at this place when the *chevet* was built by Henry III. it is now impossible to say; but if there was it must have been entirely remodelled, when in the time of Richard II. the doorway and what I have called the first part of the vestibule was formed. This, as I have said, was certainly closed at the north, and I think I can show reason for believing that the niche at the end of the present passage, which, though it stands in masonry belonging apparently to the beginning of the sixteenth century, is obviously itself of earlier date, originally stood in the destroyed north wall. The place would then consist of a rectangular recess open only to the ambulatory, and with a niche opposite the entrance.

[a] This was first pointed out to me by my friend Mr. J. Langton Barnard, to whom I am indebted for the carefully measured plan (Plate II.) which accompanies this paper. I have since found it mentioned by Brayley. I cannot account for its being set here in the time of Henry VII. which seems to be the date of the painting.

The question naturally rises, "What was the object of its formation?" It has evidently been constructed with great care and is very elaborate in its details, and further, the formidable *chevaux de frise* protecting the entrance imply that some object, to which a high value was attached, was preserved within.[a]

I have not yet been able to ascertain whether there was any image specially venerated at Westminster. But so much is continually being discovered from documents concerning the Abbey, that if the question is raised I have little doubt it will shortly be shown that there was—as the reception of such an image seems to be the only purpose for which this recess can have been designed. We have still remaining the half doors over which the image in its niche could be seen from the ambulatory, whilst the close grillage filling up the whole of the open part of the arch protected not only the doubtless costly ornaments of the figure itself, but the numerous votive offerings, the little hooks for the suspension of which so thickly stud the walls; and, just before where the image must have stood, we see the opening in the groining even now stained with the smoke of the lamp which hung through it from the peg, yet to be found in the wall of the church above.

This recess seems to have remained as formed at the end of the fourteenth century until the beginning of the sixteenth. But leaving it for a time, let us see what connection can be traced between the history of the Abbey and the name of S. Erasmus, which now appears over the doorway. It will be remembered that in 1470, when the tide of fortune seemed to be turning in favour of the House of Lancaster, Elizabeth Woodville, the Queen of Edward IV., took sanctuary at Westminster and there gave birth to a son, afterwards Edward V. Widmore (who I think may be relied upon, though he gives but the vague authority of "instruments and papers") states that this Queen built a chapel dedicated to S. Erasmus, in the east part of the church, near to the chapel of S. Mary. And in 1478 the King settled upon the Abbey the manors of Cradley and Hagley, in Worcestershire, for two monks to pray for the souls of the King and Queen in the chapel of S. Erasmus, which the Queen had built. Widmore further states that this chapel, together with the adjoining and more important one of S. Mary, was pulled down to make room for the large new Lady Chapel of

[a] In the year 1378, one Robert Haule or Hawley was murdered in the choir of Westminster during High Mass. The affair created a great sensation at the time, and the church was closed for several months. As part of their penance the murderers paid the then large sum of £200 to the Abbey. Is it possible that this money was expended upon a costly image, set up as an expiatory offering; and that the recess we are considering was prepared for the reception of the image? The dates fit exactly.

Henry VII. But, although taken down, I believe that some of Queen Elizabeth's work still remains to us.

I have already mentioned the perpendicular niche over the entrance to the passage which is the subject of this paper. This is generally set down as Islip's work, because when seen from below the most conspicuous things about it are the name and rebuses of that abbot by which it is surrounded. But on a close inspection it is seen that the niche and tabernacle work are beautifully executed in alabaster, whilst Islip's badges, together with the cresting are in firestone and of very much inferior workmanship. The date of the alabaster work is fixed[a] by the occurrence of the *rose en soleil*, the badge of Edward IV., in the centres of the quatrefoils at the base of the niche. It seems probable that when the first chapel of S. Erasmus was pulled down Abbot Islip fixed upon this place for the site of an altar where the two monks might perform the stipulated services.[b] And having done so he set up over the entrance this niche, reserved from the destruction of the old chapel, probably not so much for its own merits as for those of the sculpture it contained. This is now unworthily represented by an ugly eighteenth-century tablet. One stone in the base of the niche seems to have been lost in the removal, and the deficiency is clumsily supplied in the same material as the cresting and other additions made by Islip. The whole has been enriched with gilding and a little colour, and along the base are the remains of an inscription which I have been unable satisfactorily to make out. Brayley reads it "herasmus Epi." If he is right the *h* is a small one, and a large ℳ, possibly from the word "Martyr," can be deciphered.

When fitting this recess to its use as a chapel, Islip managed his alterations so as not to interfere with its original purpose. He took down the north wall of the fourteenth-century work and added beyond it a second vaulted compartment, replacing the image with its niche in such a position as to be seen from the ambulatory as before. The altar he placed so as to be scarcely visible from the outside, in a kind of bay-window projecting into the chapel of S. John Baptist at the place where we now enter that chapel. The south side of the window appears still to exist, but is hidden by the Kemble monument. As far as I can make out

[a] The similarity of detail between this niche and the reredos of the high altar fixes the date of the latter also.

[b] According to Nash's Worcestershire the Manors of Hagley and Cradley remained a very short time in the possession of the Abbey, they being returned to the family from whom they had been confiscated. "But," as Nash observes, "doubtless the religious had ample satisfaction made to them for this resumption."

it is similar to the screen-work of Islip's own chapel. The internal form is shown by the still remaining pavement and the mutilation of the groining.

When I pointed out to Mr. G. G. Scott my reasons for believing in the former existence of this window, he kindly caused a few stones of the floor to be taken up, and we then found not only foundations showing us the external shape of the projection, but built in those foundations a stone which had obviously at one time formed part of the jamb of the niche containing the image. Thus our previous supposition was confirmed that the niche had been moved when the window was thrown out. From the appearance of this stone I am inclined to think that in its former position the niche was much deeper than now. It is even possible that a side-light into it from the Chapel of S. John Baptist may have suggested to Islip the bold cutting away of the pier which he effected.

The altar itself consisted of a *mensa* only, exactly fitting the recess formed for it, and supported at the ends by iron dowels, the mortices for which may yet be seen in the walls. A credence was formed by cutting into the wall of the earlier division, and I think the painting is of the date of this alteration. The lettering of the larger inscription corresponds exactly with that on the grille round the tomb of Henry VII.

The chapel of S. John Baptist is now entirely cut off from the ambulatory by the tombs of Abbats William of Colchester and George Facet, and that of Ruthall, Bishop of Durham. Originally, however, there must have been a screen, and it is evident from its position that the tomb of William of Colchester (ob. 1420) was placed within the screen, as we see in other chapels the tombs of William de Valence, John of Eltham, Philippa of York, and Cardinal Langham. Facet's tomb was erected about 1500, in the line of the screen, of which with its canopy it was made to form a part, as we see was done with Lord Bourchier's monument in S. Paul's Chapel. Up to this date the chapel of S. John would be entered as the others still are directly from the ambulatory. But when (c. 1524) Ruthall's tomb was erected, filling up the space between those of the two abbats, it became necessary to provide a new entrance. To obtain this, the altar of S. Erasmus, set up scarcely twenty years before, was thrown down, and in place of the projecting window an ugly elliptical arch was formed, set back to the line of the early-English wall, and thus cutting off the corner of Islip's groining. This arch is very clumsily worked, and partly out of the old materials, for at the north end of the cornice we see the mouldings return in a manner unsuitable to their present situation, but at an angle corresponding with the external corner of the projecting window as shown by the foundations.

This last alteration brought the place into the form in which we now see it, and nearly a century and a half after its insertion the outer doorway became the entrance to S. John's Chapel. It is, however, probable that the image for the accommodation of which the recess was originally formed stood in its old niche for a few years longer, till King Henry removed it, and, extinguishing the lamp, piously appropriated it and such of the ornaments and offerings as were worth taking away. Since that time the place has suffered little injury except from neglect and the decay of the painting.